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ON PAGE C7

THE WASHINGTON POST
4 May 1980

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End of the Rose Garden Strategy

Jimmy Carter is moving smartly to bury the busted Iranian rescue mission. Hence the quick appointment of Sen. Muskie as secretary of state, and the decision to give up the Rose Garden in favor of the campaign trail.

But can a president walk away from such a fiasco as if nothing had happened? Is it possible to put a lid on one of the most widely publicized failures in history?

"No way," would seem to be the answer at first blush. But the sad turn of events in Iran rubbed against all sections of public and official opinion in a moment of intense competition among rivals for the presidency.

Liberal sentiment took offense at the resort to force. The resignation of Cyrus Vance as secretary of state furnished a martyr and a cause célèbre. Though the former secretary has said nothing in public, he has privately been telling friends that the mission was a "harebrained" scheme that couldn't possibly have succeeded. That view, coupled with alarm about driving Iran into the arms of Russia, is generally entertained by Vance's friends and supporters throughout government, and in the press and television.

Conservatives and others, disposed to support the mission at first, have been made increasingly uneasy by details

leaked to silence liberal critics. The most prestigious committee in the Congress, the Senate Armed Services Committee, has engaged itself to get to the bottom of a veritable Everest of distressing rumors and reports.

Leading committee members suspect that the basic plan was far too complicated to succeed. They fear the preparations, particularly the training of the helicopter pilots, were inadequate. They are inclined to believe that leaks may have compromised some intelligence assets in Iran, and ongoing negotiations for base rights in Oman. They wonder whether the White House did not impose too many controls from the top. They smell a political role in the shaping of the operation—perhaps by the president's chief of staff, Hamilton Jordan.

But despite their extent and depth, the doubts and suspicions seem sure to be muffled. For one thing, there is the impact of the Muskie appointment. By itself, it turned attention from the outgoing, and toward the incoming, secretary of state. Vance is already a receding figure for whom no one will risk doing serious battle. The play in Washington is for the favor and attention of Muskie.

On policy matters, however, Muskie takes almost exactly the same position as Vance. All the people who liked Vance, particularly in the State Department and in the media, also like Muskie. They are not going to embarrass the new boy, and spoil their standing with him, by taking up the cudgels for what is over and done.

The disposition of the liberal critics of the Iran policy to let bygones be bygones inevitably crimps the style of President Carter's chief Democratic opponents. Sen. Kennedy is made to sound self-serving and shrill when he goes after the president on Iran.

As to conservative and moderate critics, they are tied up by their own problems. John Stennis, the chairman of the armed services committee, has always—as his behavior in the Watergate investigation showed—equated responsibility with serving the interest of the president. The committee as a whole has a mystique of secrecy. Several of its leading members, notably Sen. Henry Jackson, believe as a matter of policy that it is wrong to place heavy emphasis on the hostages issue.

Moreover it is not at all clear that the armed services committee is going to find the usual army of eager whistle blowers. The officials who planned the operation at the top—Secretary of Defense Harold Brown; Gen. David Jones, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Adm. Stansfield Turner of the Central Intelligence Agency—are

not about to acknowledge the weakness of their work, or their inexperience in such operations. As to participants in the mission, including its leader, Col. Charles Beckwith, they too may have a reason for caution. The leaving behind of bodies, and of secret documents, maps, weapons and helicopters, suggests someone panicked in the middle of the operation.

Accordingly, the leading Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan, is in poor position to exploit the issue in an assertive way. Rather than run the risk of seeming to criticize brave men, his best bet is to quarrel about minor details—like timing.

Politically, therefore, the president is acting shrewdly to end the Rose Garden strategy with its emphasis on the Iranian hostages. No doubt former Carter fans are right to charge him with hypocrisy in calling the rescue mission an "incomplete success." They are also correct in charging lack of candor when he claims the battle against inflation has "turned the corner." But politically Carter's best shot is to focus attention on the contest with Ronald Reagan. That is one fight he might well win, for the issue that now shapes up before the country is which candidate for president is the least incompetent.